CHRIST AND WEALTH

November 6, 1988

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Hebrew 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-27

"How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!
-Mark 10:23b (RSV)

My, I wish he hadn't said that!... Harvard psychiatrist, Robert Coles, was doing research on how children of wealthy families come to their values. He was particularly interested in how religious, church families dealt with the ethical issues of their own wealth. A prosperous New Orleans attorney said...

> "I can find passages to make me feel good about this life I've always enjoyed, and always will enjoy until I die. But I have a legal mind - I majored in English, liked literary criticism... so I can't overlook what I read. I can't turn a clear-cut message into a confusing one... He gave us that unforgettable image of the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Well, I guess I'm one big camel, and even now, I can anticipate the crunch I'll be in."

Coles says it was "one of the most Biblical moments I will ever experience - the sight and sound of a professing Christian aware that he was in deep trouble." [Harvard Diary, "Christ and the Rich," p. 19-21]

It is a troublesome topic - this matter of Christ and wealth. There was a legendary incident once involving John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller was the wealthiest Protestant layperson in the country. He was a devout Baptist: his contributions alone constituted 12% of the budget of the Northern Baptist denomination in the 1920's. By 1960 he had given away $552 million. He was a leading layman and chairman of the pulpit committee of Park Avenue Baptist Church in New York - a lovely three year old Gothic ediface - much admired by Ralph Adams Cram, architect of this building, who said, "I wish I had designed it myself." Rockefeller had a vision of the church of the future - non-sectarian,

rational, world-embracing. He wanted the leading preacher of the day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, to be the pastor and he wanted to convince the Park Avenue Baptists to sell their new building and join him in a new venture on Riverside Drive. Fosdick, in the meantime, was being thrown out of the Presbyterian Church for being too progressive. Rockefeller was successful on all fronts. Fosdick was called. Riverside Church was built and was, and is, an embodiment of Rockefeller's vision. The legendary incident occurred in the early stages of negotiations between the wealthy Rockefeller and the progressive preacher. (They later became dear and life-long friends.) In Rockefeller's office, Fosdick was protesting that "he did not wish to be known as the pastor of the richest man in the country." Rockefeller responded, "Do you think that more people will criticize you on account of my wealth, than will criticize me on account of your theology?" [Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Preacher, Pastor, Prophet, p. 161-162]

Now we may not be as large a camel as the attorney and we surely do not relate to the Rockefeller fortune, but I would propose to you that the differences are in degree and not essence. Comedian George Carlin knows that when he talks about our "stuff." We have to have more space, not so much to live in particularly, but to keep, protect and display our "stuff." We need more walls for our art, shelves for the stereo, drawers, closets, square feet... Some of us know about that very personally. If you didn't have much "stuff" as a child, chances are your "stuff" is pretty important to you. E. B. White wrote a hilarious essay about moving from one apartment to another in New York City and the difficulty he had parting with accumulated but essentially worthless "stuff." I loved the essay because when we were preparing to move to Chicago, I used to check the alley every night to recover the treasures someone was discarding during the day. My children were doing the same thing - recovering baseball cards, beloved but worn out basketballs, beginners piano lesson books, treasures!

The kind of possessions we cherish is determined often by our profession. Not everybody owns jewels and furs and Jaguars. For some it's art or records or books. A minister friend of mine tells about the spiritual crisis in his life when his study burned. All his books, all his sermon manuscripts, lectures, classes, files - were destroyed. He told that it felt like he hadn't existed. He was deeply depressed, in grief. Later he came to understand his attachment and what it meant theologically. Finally he even understood that there was a new freedom in being unencumbered. But it was an extraordinarily painful experience.

There is a lot of ambiguity and discomfort about this topic and it is very much heightened by the incident which constitutes our text this morning.

Jesus and entourage are on their way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross, that is to say. He has just rebuked the disciples for turning children away: "Let them come" he said, "to such belongs the Kingdom..." At just that moment a wealthy young man runs to Jesus, throws himself at his feet - creating an interesting contrast, to say the least: an aristocrat kneeling at the feet of a poor man and asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recites the second section of the Ten

Commandments which the young man has already kept. That is to say, he has done all the right things but he still doesn't feel right. He hasn't experienced God's love and his own salvation. Please notice how gentle Jesus is with him. He does not criticize or condemn. He simply issues a prescription: five imperatives: go - sell all - give to the poor - come - follow me. I don't know whether Mark had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote the next line, but I think he must have. It's a funny line. The young man's "countenance fell..." I should guess so. He was appalled, as a matter of fact, for Mark observes, "he had great possessions." He had a lot of them and he loved them.

The young man fades and Jesus makes an observation about wealth which astonishes his disciples. The official teaching of Judaism was that wealth is ordinarily evidence of divine blessing. Rich people were good people. Poor people are sinners. They didn't have the resources or the time or the inclination to be good Jews. They were working full time just to survive. The disciples are amazed and disturbed to hear that it will be difficult for wealthy people to get into the kingdom because they assumed the kingdom was filled with them.

Then comes this stunning little parable with which Christian people have been arguing for twenty centuries: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been some very imaginative attempts to get us out from under that one. In fact, the textual scholars who spend their time examining ancient manuscripts under a microscope say that there is evidence that this text has been tampered with repeatedly. We aren't the first ones, apparently, to wish he didn't say it or mean it.

Later scholars would try to help by pointing out that the Greek word for rope is quite similar to the word for camel and that what Jesus probably said was that it is easier for a rope, a piece of twine, to go through the eye of a needle. At least the image is consistent. The task is difficult, but, in a sense, doable.

The most imaginative effort is the suggestion that ancient city walls had small openings through which late arrivers might safely enter the city - without the danger of opening the gates. This opening, they contend, was called the "eye of the needle." A camel could get through - on his knees, with his owner pushing and pulling. It's a wonderful image. Preachers on Stewardship Sunday have been known to suggest that loaded camels, particularly, are going to have difficulty, and that the way to squeeze in is to unload some of the goods - as in a pledge to the church. It is an approach to fund raising not to be taken lightly. Scholars trace this interpretation to the nineth century and sadly conclude that the whole matter spurious.

The sequence is not yet concluded, however. Assume that Jesus has used hyperbole, an outrageous situation to make his point: that he intended to create some tension with his stern demand. The disciples are astonished. They aren't rich men: in fact, they are poor. But they immediately recognize that if what he said is true - all of them are in

trouble. They love what they have even if it's one robe and one pair of sandals. They are no more willing than the rich, young man to sell all and give it away. "Who then can be saved?" they ask Jesus. And they get an enigmatic answer: "With men - with you - with human effort, creativity, hard work - it's impossible, but not with God. With God, all things are possible."

What we really must do is go back and look again at this interesting, wealthy young man. What actually was wrong with him? He's not bad. In fact, he's good, admirable, upright, generous and he is theologically sensitive. He's got courage and character. What's wrong here? What about him causes him to miss the grace and love of Jesus Christ? He is, by the way, the only person in the Gospel of Mark, who Jesus calls and who does not respond by following. He can't. He's not free to. That's what is wrong. He's imprisoned, I think, by his possessions. He's even sorry about it. There's a sense in which he knows what's wrong. In point of fact, what Jesus teaches him is that he doesn't own a thing actually. He's owned by his possessions, in service to them, dependent on them for happiness, security and joy.

He has worked so hard, been so successful, accomplished so much that there is no room in his life for grace; maybe there is a very fundamental character defect here. He's in a hurry - no time, no empty spaces for the surprising gifts of beauty God's world gives, no place perhaps for gifts of friendship and love. He stands in poignant contrast to the child Jesus has just used as an example of the Kingdom. The child hasn't earned a thing yet. The child knows that all of life is a gift: from the sun newly warm every morning, to the simple gifts of playing with friends, to the miraculous appearance of food at mealtime, to the security of parental love and a warm bed, the child knows that all is grace. This young man has quite forgotten what it is to receive that which he has not earned.

It is not appropriate to resolve the tension in this text too quickly or easily. I believe it was meant to make us uncomfortable and reflective. But it is fair to observe that Jesus did not say go - sell - give, to every wealthy person he encountered. He had wealthy friends: Nicodemus, Zacheus, Joseph of Arimathea. He didn't tell them to sell it all. What he said to this young man was his personal prescription for salvation.

There is, I would submit, no more important task for modern American Christians than coming to terms with the reality of wealth. Bob Lynn, Presbyterian clergyman and executive with the Lily Foundation, said one time that the American mainline church has to do one of two things soon: either come to a new understanding of its own affluence or else get poor. I have been pondering that for several years and know he is right.

The first thing to do is to stop feeling guilty for who we are. Theologian, Douglas John Hall, in a book on the topic, points out how useless it is for middle class Western Christians to feel guilty for being middle class Western Christians.

The second thing is not to resolve the tension Jesus created too easily by suggesting that we're not wealthy. We are wealthy. We are the wealthiest people in the world and in all of history. We who are wealthy

are becoming wealthier - while the poor are becoming poorer. Tax breaks for us haven't trickled down on anybody. In a Saturday Review article a few years ago, two psychologists pointed out that we love "poor talk," but the reality is that in two decades our disposable income has risen 57%. It isn't true - that's "poor talk" - that we "had more when we earned less." What is true, these psychologists pointed out, is the "adaptation level principle": i.e., yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities and that middle class Americans are susceptible to persuasion to spend it all: spend more than we have. The simple fact is that we have bought into the cultural ideology that "stuff" will make us happy, secure, content. And if you buy into that, you are imprisoned in an infinite process which is exacerbated by our position here, tucked in between pagan towers - full of glittering stuff. Of course we feel poor, sitting here next door to "900" and Water Tower Place. But it isn't true.

There is no international or national economist who does not know and say that for our survival we must now address this appalling and growing gap between haves and have nots.

The third thing is to listen to Jesus and to hear what he said.

He did not condemn wealth. Wealth is not an evil in itself. In fact, productivity - and there does not seem to be a way to have productivity without someone making money, a lesson which the Soviets not only have learned but now openly acknowledge - productivity is the only thing that can possibly feed the world's hungry people. We may not choose to apply it for good ends, but in point of fact, there is enormous potential for justice in the right use of the wealth we produce. We are all tired of unlikely analogies, but the truth remains that the cost of one new jet fighter could establish 40,000 village pharmacies and that one half the military expenditure of the Western nations would resolve water and agriculture problems which create famine, permanently. We could do that if we wanted to.

The fourth thing is to understand how intimate and personal this subject is for all of us. The detail that jumped out of this text this time for me is the note that when the young man said he had done all that the law required and still didn't feel right, Jesus "looking upon him, loved him." And then later, it happened again. The disciples are astonished at the eye of the needle business and Jesus "looks at them" in love and compassion and grace. This is personal. This is very near the heart of the matter for them and for us.

I think there is a sense in which he was absolutely, literally, fundamentally, accurate about the way things are with you and me - 2,000 years later.

There is a sense in which you and I don't own a thing which we are not willing to give away.

There is a sense in which you and I are owned by whatever we cannot and will not give away: a sense in which who we are is defined very precisely by what we can or cannot give away.

That's the issue here. Let's not resolve it too easily and let's not compromise it. With the disciples, I am astonished - not simply by the demands he seems to be making of me - but by the truth I know in what he said. I identify with that rich young man. I don't have anything I can't give away. You can't live until you know something for which you are willing to give everything, including your life.

The final word is grace. Truly. Costly grace. With God all things are possible. You don't have to force it, or drag it in. He said it. He's not done with that young man. There will be auster encounter: God loves us all - rich, poor and in between. "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." God wants all of us to live fully, joyfully, free from frustration, anxiety and fear.

It's what the Gospel is about.

There is no resolution in text, nor is there much of a concluding resolution to this sermon. The words must take their own shape in your life - in ways known best and only to you. But do hear them again: "-go - sell - give - come - follow and you will have treasure in heaven."

Amen.